

Ed Loyd (202) 720-4623

Susan Fleming 202-720-6794

**USDA ANNOUNCES AMENDMENTS TO INTERIM FINAL RULE AND
PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD FOR THE FARM AND RANCH LANDS
PROTECTION PROGRAM**

ELLISTON, Mont., July 28, 2006 – Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment Mark Rey today announced the release of an amended interim final rule for the Farm and Ranch Lands Protection Program (FRPP) with a request for public comment. FRPP helps landowners protect their land by providing matching funds to help purchase development rights to keep productive farm and ranch land in agricultural uses.

"America's prime farm and ranch lands are among our most valuable national resources," said Rey. "Conservation programs like FRPP help farmers and ranchers protect these resources and provide safe and abundant food and fiber for the entire nation."

Public comments on the rule will be accepted for 60 days from the date the rule appears in the Federal Register. USDA proposes that land eligibility criteria should focus on preserving the nation's most critical farm and ranch lands resources. Since the program's inception in 1996, more than 288,000 acres of farm and ranch land have been protected in 43 states. USDA announced earlier this year nearly \$70 million in available FRPP funding during fiscal year 2006. FRPP protects productive agricultural land by purchasing conservation easements to limit conversion of farm and ranch lands to non-agricultural uses.

Using existing programs, USDA partners with State, tribal, or local governments and non-government organizations to acquire conservation easements or other interests in land from landowners. USDA provides up to 50 percent of the appraised fair market value of the conservation easement in this voluntary program. State and local entities can match that amount, including the use of landowner donations.

The eligible farm or ranch land must have the following characteristics:

- contain productive soils or historic or archaeological sites;
- be part of a pending offer from a non-governmental organization, state, tribe or local farmland protection program;
- be privately owned;
- have a conservation plan for highly erodible soils;
- be large enough to sustain agricultural production;
- be accessible to markets for what the land produces; and
- be situated in a landscape that avoids agricultural fragmentation that supports long-term agricultural production.

For more information on FRPP and other conservation programs, contact your local NRCS office, listed in the telephone book under U.S. Department of Agriculture, or online visit www.nrcs.usda.gov. This amended FRPP interim final rule can be viewed at: <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/programs/frpp>.

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